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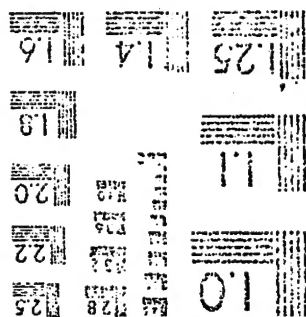
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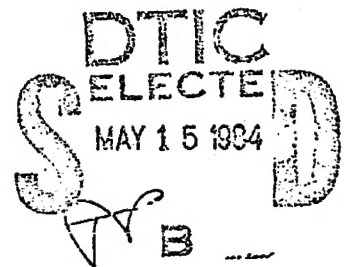
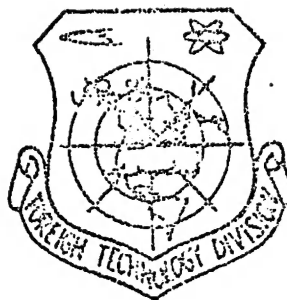
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THE INDOCHINA UNDERGROUND

by

R. Trinquier



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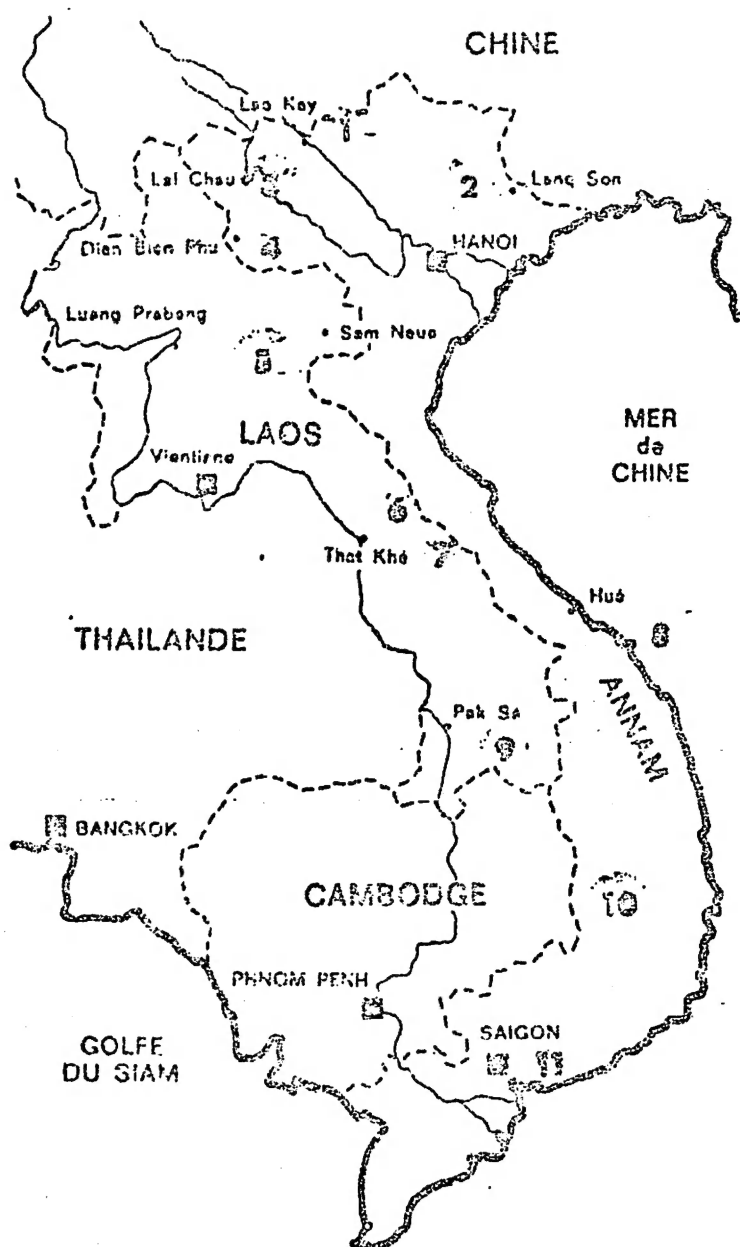


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-The Indochina Underground. Key: 1-Cho Quan Lo (February 1954); 2-GCMA Intermittent Commandos; 3-Ly Seo Nung (beginning October 1955), 4-Hebert: Aiglon, Calamar, Colibri (31 October 1953), 5-Mao Underground (Sassi: beginning April 1955), 6-7-mobile Laos Underground (Col. Lagneaux), 8-Island of Cu Lao Re, 9-Atropen Underground, 10-Ere Free Forces (Hentic before April 1953, then Thebaut), 11-Cape Saint Jacques (Ty Wan), 12-China, 13-China Sea, 14-Thailand, 15-Cambodia, 16-Gulf of Siam.

Foreword

In 1951 to want to create an Action Corps and conduct guerrilla warfare against the Viet Minh could seem at first sight to be a real risk. It is a little as if someone had asked the Germans to create an underground in France during the occupation.

Thanks to the intense and clever propaganda of the Viet Minh, the mass of the Vietnamese population, inhabiting the coastal zone and the deltas, became hard for our Action to reach.

If we still had any sympathy left in the rebel zone populated by Vietnamese, it is the fruit of war fatigue and stems from the fact that the Viet Minh promises: INDEPENDENCE-LIBERTY-HAPPINESS, have not been achieved. A certain amount of nostalgia exists for the "French Peace" and its return. But this is a passive emotion; the infiltration of the Viet Minh, their C E (expansion unknown), and their control over the population are such that the best we could hope for from the people who are favorable to us is that they leave, if they can, the rebel zone to come into the controlled zone. They are not of much help to Action.

On the other hand, the extreme diversities of the mountain races who inhabit the valleys and who live at various heights in the mountains provide us with some opportunities.

At all times, and in all primitive countries, the mountain people have been the enemies of the plains people. This is because the authority to which they have to pay taxes resides in the plain or in the valley, generally rich. Accustomed to risks and to a rough and uncomfortable life, they almost always like war for itself, and sometimes because of the looting it permits, which is a source of gain.

It would have been difficult to make these rough and half-savage people, whose horizon does not exceed the next mountain and whose political organization does not

exceed the clan, understand the complexity of the Indochina war and to get them interested in it.

On the other hand, they could be reached by appealing to immediate interests, or by reawakening old hostilities.

The needy Vietnamese, living with difficulty on their little rice paddies, and who never dared to go into the higher areas unless supported by established authority to find some source of gains there, have always been detested.

The hostility of the mountain people toward those living in the high valleys has been identical for analogous reasons.

Since the Viet Minh recruits the majority of its fighters among the Vietnamese, this feeling of hostility could be exploited. Therefore it follows that the first underground fighters have been recruited in the highest mountains, the "Meos". Fanatically individualistic, with a savage independence, enemies of all authority and attached to their corner of earth and rocks, they easily take the side of those who can give them the means of fighting against all established power.

Then recruitment reached the high valley people. Accustomed to more comfort and with a more stable political organization and sensitive to Viet Minh propaganda, they already form a less dependable element.

The basic elements which were utilized by the G.C.M.A. (Composite Airborne Commando Group) to create underground fighters included the diversity of races, opposition between clans, the ambitions of certain leaders, the hostilities shown toward Vietnamese and especially the hostilities shown against the Viet Minh occupying their country.

But the mountain people are rough, they have no education, and are ignorant of the world outside of their mountain or their valley.

Consequently, it has been very difficult to find valuable elements among them, and to produce minor technicians (radio operators, team leaders, etc.), necessary to set up the skeleton of a command organization.

In order to alleviate this major inconvenience and to get going more rapidly, European staffs have been used. But except for rare exceptions the European finds it hard to adapt to this underground fighter life in Indochina. He cannot live in the brush for long; in general he does not speak the language; and he has trouble making himself understood because he has only very poor interpreters at his disposition. He cannot pass unnoticed; his presence is quickly known by the Viet Minh who have spies everywhere, and this fact alone constitutes a serious danger for the underground fighters being trained.

I have noted many times that in a critical period the European constitutes a serious handicap. The natives, who naturally put their confidence in him, have a tendency to group around him, hoping that he will know how to guide them; thus they lose their spirit of initiative which is their only value. Left totally to themselves, they would often have found a solution which no European would be capable of devising, because of their knowledge of the country and its possibilities, their adaptation to the conditions of local life, to their primitive instinct which is sharpened by danger, and to their ability to suffer, which is much greater than ours.

Thus the Indochina underground fighters are very complex. From the officers and non-commissioned officers who lead them they demand a deep knowledge of the country and of the people.

They constitute a formidable weapon against the Vietnamese, but those in command must not forget that they are brittle, difficult to command, and more should not be expected of them than they can give.

R. P. (Roger Trinquier)
Introduction to the Indochina Freedom Fighters,
General Studies, December 1953.

1. The Report of Colonel Trinquier; Prologue to Lai Thieu

The 2nd BCCP (Colonial Battalion of Parachute Commandos) and pacification

"I may go to your ceremonial parade, but-I am disgusted because you have sold yourself!"

Since I showed some surprise at these extravagant terms, the colonel repeated to me with a very angry tone mixed with malice, "Yes, you have sold yourself, you understand? Sold!"

I replied simply, "I hope, Colonel, that your words are worse than your thoughts. I request permission to leave."

Without waiting for an answer, I saluted, made a half turn, opened the office door and slowly descended to the ground floor, where the office of Lieutenant Colonel Daboval was located. He was in command of the Colonial Denny Brigade of Parachute Commandos, of which my Battalion, the 2nd BCCP, formed part.

Our two-year stay was ended. We were going to return to France. I had come to invite the Commanding Colonel of the TAPI (Airborne Troops in Indonesia) to the final ceremonial parade of the Battalion before our departure. I also wanted to inform him that I had asked General Landouzy, known and loved throughout the colonial army, to preside at this ceremony.

I entered the office of Daboval, my respected senior and more a comrade than a chief.

"Well!" He said to me, "Your visit was short. Obviously it didn't go well?"

I recounted the scene. He did not appear very surprised.

"What are you going to do?"

I did not have much choice, "right now I am going to address a letter to the superior Commanding General for the colonel to apologize to me. I know he cannot appreciate me, but everything has its limits!"

"Yes," Daboval said to me, "That is what you must do. However, think about it! If the colonel denies having said you sold yourself, you are going to put yourself into a jam. . ."

"We have had a difficult confrontation because we have a different concept of the use of a parachute battalion. That does not take anything away from his moral rectitude, which is exemplary. Therefore it is unthinkable that he would deny it in front of the General; otherwise we would have to revise our opinion of him."

I drafted my request, and gave it to Daboval, asking him to take it to the Colonel.

"Today is Wednesday. If, before the end of the week, I have not been summoned by the Colonel, I shall go directly to the General himself.

"Good luck," Daboval said to me, shaking my hand.

Accompanied by my driver, loyal Surcouf, I climbed into my jeep and took the road to Lai Thieu, where the 2nd BCCP had been stationed for two years.

I hoped that the insults of the Colonel had exceeded his thoughts. I thought he would summon me and that, in the calm of the office once the storm was over, the matter would be settled between men of good will. Certainly the Colonel was not accusing me of having sold myself to our adversaries. He blamed me for working too closely with General Boyer de Latre, the civilian and military commander of South Vietnam, one of the generals who had made the most progress in pacification in the south. He blamed me for having tried, in spite of him, a certain number of experiments locally crowned with success, and of having become too tied down to an area where the Battalion had its main base. For him a parachute battalion had to be an essentially mobile unit, able to strike rapidly at different points in the territory without being based anywhere.

I had explained to him a number of times that the 2nd BCCP combat units were always available. We had participated in all of the major operations in Cambodia, Cochinchina and South Annam, 40 of them airborne, and had made many raids alone throughout southern Indochina. All of this was enough to demonstrate our mobility. In particular we had jumped at the Tam Quan railroad station in Central Annam, 15 kilometers in the interior, destroyed 2 locomotives, 40 wagons and the repair shops of the Railroad Company.

Nevertheless, I believe that since our rear fixed base, our services, offices, and I myself were in the middle of the people, we should live close to them in order to get to know them better, to make them like us and to bring them to help us. Many times I had asked General Boyer de Lattre to conduct operations in the Lai Thieu region in order to free the town which the Viet Minh was cutting off in all directions.

At nightfall on 15 November 1947, after we had marched to Saigon, we arrived at Lai Thieu. We had discovered, some 19 kilometers from the capital, a town in the state of siege. The day before a Viet Minh battalion had occupied it and had burned the market. Lai Thieu seemed deserted. Before nightfall all of the inhabitants had shut themselves up at home; during the daytime they avoided any contact with our paratroopers.

Two years later this same population was living in a close relationship with the battalion. The region had been pacified. To a large extent this was our work.

Our direct adversary was the 301st Viet Minh regiment. It was based at the edge of Lai Thieu, in a dense forest zone called the Quadrilateral extending between Thu Dau Mot, Lai Thieu, Thu Duc and Bien Hoa, extending as far as the

plantations. The 301st was the uncontested master of the region. As soon as we arrived General Boyer de Lattre had said to us, "Take whatever time you need, but get rid of them!"

The first patrols of the battalion, composed of young men still green, had produced some serious engagements. However, I had never completely engaged the 301st, which was waiting for us in convenient positions. We would have risked having the entire battalion destroyed in a few hours. . . .

We had tested the periphery, which was held solidly. Two large scale operations with other units had allowed us to explore the zone held by the 301st, but without causing it any great losses. They had many hiding places and disappeared during the time of the operation (one day or two at the most).

When our young paratroopers had become seasoned, I proposed that General Boyer de Lattre allow me to take the battalion for eight days, at the most, to try and experiment in the Quadrilateral. My plan was to go to the very center of their haunts in tight formation, and to stay there for a week to set up many ambushes every night. He accepted. This was in the month of February, in the middle of the dry season in the south. I chose the date myself: three days before the full moon and three days after.

On the appointed day at sunrise the battalion in tight formation approached the edge of the forest. The sentries gave word of our approach; a few shots were exchanged. As usual the 301st had disappeared into its hiding places to avoid any engagement.

During the day by platoons the companies became acquainted with most of the paths and prepared ambushes for the night. All paths where it was not possible to set up an ambush were summarily booby-trapped. At six o'clock the final meal of

the day had been eaten and all of the ambushes, with a combat group, were in place. Everyone was forbidden until daybreak. The order was to fire on anyone who appeared in the ambush field. It was also forbidden to inspect the results before seven in the morning, i.e., a good hour after daybreak. An impressive silence filled the forest. Toward three o'clock in the morning, two or three booty-trapped grenades exploded. With the sun life returned to the forest. Coffee and snacks. The cans of rations were opened, and the laughter and voices of the young paratroopers could be heard. Two corpses were picked up on the path where the grenades had exploded.

The patrol explored before it began; numerous thickets were searched. In the evening a new system of traps and ambushes was set up. And again the silence weighed heavily on the forest until morning. During the day the forest seemed empty. However everyone knew that at least one battalion of the 301st was there, quite close to us in their hiding places and watching for our departure. It was necessary to wait for the fourth night for the Viet Minh to take a chance on the paths at night. This was the dry season, and there was no water in this forest. About ten men had tried to leave their hiding places to get some. They had been killed. Three wounded men revealed to us why they came out: the lack of water. Every night from that time on men who tried to leave the forest, to go for water, to carry messages and to get information, were killed. On the fifth day about ten gravely wounded men left their cover and surrendered.

The night was dark and anxiety depressed everyone; even the most courageous did not escape it. They did not feel freed of it until the moon finally rose. The corpses piled up; they were buried during the day. The wounded men were transported to Lai Thieu.

On the seventh day the moon rose at 10:30 p.m. in a total, deep and dismal silence. The men were waiting for this moment to finally breathe easily.

During the day a dozen Viet Minh surrendered. During the night others had been killed or seriously injured on the paths. It was necessary to return; intended for other missions, the battalion had to return to its quarters for a new operation. In the morning, in small groups trying not to arouse the attention of the still hidden rebels, the battalion returned to Lai Thieu.

The balance was impressive: about 40 dead, about 20 wounded and about 15 prisoners. One person in the battalion had been killed, a new arrival, young Tresorier. I had had him at my Command Post to get to know him and also to familiarize him with the Indochina environment. My Command Post had been set up behind some tree trunks near a path. During the night we first heard some steps, and then whispering. All eyes, even with the tree trunks, tried to probe into the thick night. Tresorier had been seated next to me. Undoubtedly he had not been able to control his anxiety, and he stood bolt upright to try to see. A burst from an automatic pistol killed him instantly.

I received warm congratulations from General Boyer de Lattre, but none from the colonel. He believed that these ambushes, this stagnation of a battalion for eight days deep in the forest, were not worthy of a shock troop.

Confidence had been restored among the inhabitants. The paratroopers were living in their homes. They soon became part of the family which sheltered them; they had made themselves useful in helping their landlords as much as they could. The battalion had a number of specialists available (masons, mechanics and carpenters). They first rebuilt the burned market and then restored the pleasant aspect of the small town to it.

I had the very best relationships with the prominent people, the merchants, and the inhabitants, many of whom were catholic. I particularly had excellent relations with a sugar grower who was very rich. One day at his home, to which

he had invited me, I said to him quite simply, "Mr. Tho, you have sugar plantations in all areas. You harvest your cane without any problems. Therefore you must have friends among the Viet Minh, because otherwise it would not be possible for you to work."

"That's true," he said to me, "I know very many of them and even some high level leaders."

"I'm going to make you a proposition which may surprise you. I would very much like to meet one of them, at your home, at night for example. I would like to know why they are fighting and how they see the future of their country when peace is restored. I will not ask for any military information. And naturally, after our meeting, he can freely return to his home."

"That is not impossible," Mr. Tho said to me. "I know a commander of some catholic troops. He is the man I deal with for the use of my plantations."

Indeed, toward midnight one night Mr. Tho knocked on my door and said that the troop commander was there. He was tall, thin and had the very pale complexion of men who have spent the larger part of their time in the shade and have not been particularly well fed."

On my arrival he rose and we shook hands. He seemed anxious. I reassured him.

"I am happy to see you," I said to him. "It is always more pleasant to exchange words than gun shots. I would like to know why you were fighting, what your present and remote goals are, and how you picture your personal future in this adventure."

"I am not a communist," he said to me. "I command some troops largely independent of the 301st, whose men, and especially the permanent staff, are mainly communists. I am ambitious as young people of my age and of my education generally are (he spoke perfect French). At the beginning of the conflict, like many others, I had to choose my camp. I have no particular animosity toward the

French. I chose the side which offered me the best chances to rise in society. If I were to take your side today, what could you offer me? The position of warrant officer in a unit made up of auxiliaries. . . . because I would certainly not be able to take my entire company with me. And then I would always look like a renegade, a quitter with respect to my comrades and, let's say it, a traitor to the cause which we have chosen. In the Viet Minh ranks I am already a captain, the commander of a troop of 150 men. What I want is to go up in rank as fast and as high as possible. Some day we will make peace. There has never been a war which did not end with a peace treaty. On that day my situation and my position will be a function of the rank which I have obtained. Now, in this field, perhaps you can aid me."

I listened, astonished and interested by this statement.

He continued, "Maybe you can help me. I told you that I am not a communist. I know General Nguyen Binh, the big man in the south, quite well. He is not a communist. If you inflict a serious defeat on the 301st, my neighbors, I could take its place and go up in rank. And this would not displease Nguyen Binh. The last operation that you made--I was not in the raid--spread terror in the regiment. No one dared leave the hiding places for two days after departure. But despite your searches, you did not find the Command Post of the regiment; however you passed very close to it. I can give you its layout. It is a very well made installation. If you destroy it, the 301st will no longer be able to stay here. It will be forced to move toward the north. Its departure will increase my importance in the region."

"You can forward the plan to me through Mr. Tho when you want. I cannot give you the date of my next operation, because I do not have my battalion available. However, through Mr. Tho I shall be able to warn you so that you have the time to get away and be away from the raid."

"That's useless," he told me. "When you conduct an operation, I always know it 24 hours in advance."

I took this blow without blinking. Still I had had the impression that I was preparing my operation with the maximum precaution to keep it a secret. I still had a lot to learn.

Mr. Tho had prepared a package of various foods for him. He refused it. "We have everything we need," he said. "And then we should not get used to luxury."

I gave him TVH as a code name.

One month later, in the middle of March, I obtained permission from General Boyer de Latre to conduct another eight-day operation in the same style as those in the Quadrilateral. Mr. Tho had brought the plan of the 301st Command Post. It was discovered quickly. Actually it was a fine subterranean organization. The offices were set up well: papers, files and typewriters. But it was devoid of personnel. It had been evacuated in haste; the personnel had been able to escape, but with empty hands, leaving all the files behind.

The operation had even more important results than the first one and, this time, with no losses. Our men knew the Quadrilateral like the back of their hand. They knew the smallest paths and the smallest thickets. At the end of eight days all of the paths had been booby-trapped. It had become uninhabitable for the 301st, which had to move out, leaving in the interior only some small surveillance elements very vulnerable to our units. Taking turns on rest days, they captured these little groups.

Sometime later the Commanding Colonel of the sector planned to conduct an important operation in the Quadrilateral. It was almost empty. This allowed his troops to learn it perfectly without any great risks.

Now, all of my companies had been dispersed: 2 to Cambodia with my aide, one into the Tourane region and the other on alert at Tan Son Nhut. Therefore I proposed to the Colonel to accompany him with the battalion elements that I could recover. But I thought that if TVH could give me some information, the operation would not be without results, as it risked being. Therefore I asked Mr. Tho to invite him to his home, as he had already done several times.

TVH came, but without taking many precautions; on the road he was captured by a patrol from the Tu Duc sector. He was known, he had already blown up the plantation train a number of times, and therefore he was considered to be a good catch and was sent under a good escort to the 2nd Bureau in Saigon. General Boyer de Latre was aware of the contacts I had with TVH and had approved them, as had my class comrade, Commandant Savani, the head of the 2nd Bureau. I immediately went to Saigon and saw Savani. This capture had put him into a difficult situation.

"He must be freed," I said to him.

"Certainly," he said to me, "but this will not be easy. If I freed him, he would immediately become suspect among his own people. And I have many Vietnamese in my 2nd Bureau. Some are double agents or simply unreliable. He must escape, or at least give a real impression to everyone that he did escape. That is his only chance. I will set things up. He arrived here this morning and no one has interrogated him yet. He must leave as soon as possible."

Then I went to find TVH. He received me as I had expected, very coldly.

"I thought I could put my trust in you, and you set a trap for me. That is not worthy of a French officer."

I explained what was going on to him, and gave him the plan developed for his escape.

"Obviously you will be shot at, but do not stop, made a dash for it; the bullets will pass close but on the side."

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. I set up a meeting point for him at a precise spot, after the Da Kao bridge at 5 p.m. Then I told him that I would take him in my jeep and that I would drop him off on the road, at the spot he indicated.

"I am forced to trust you," he said to me.

Then he added more calmly, "Anyway, I do trust you."

Our conversation had lasted ten minutes. I left him with a hand shake. At the appointed time I was at the rendezvous. I had said to Surcouf, "I am waiting for a Vietnamese whom I do not know very well. I shall drive the jeep. You climb into the back and watch my carbine." Ten minutes later TVH arrived calmly, as if nothing had happened, while I was speaking with Surcouf at the side of the jeep. I shook his hand.

"Everything went well; now you are reassured. Climb in, we are going to leave."

Before Surcouf had the time to sit in the back, TVH sat down there. I did not say anything and took the wheel. Surcouf sat at my right.

TVH thus had my carbine at his disposition. It would have been easy for him to kill both of us and escape, thus performing a real feat. While I was driving I watched the end of the barrel of my carbine leaning against the two seats. Obviously if I had seen it move, I would have reacted. Nothing happened. Half way on the route to Lai Thieu, TVH asked me to let him off. I stopped and saw him take off rapidly through the rice fields and disappear.

This event had not passed unnoticed. I knew from Mr. Tho that he had been suspected, and then brought before a military court which had acquitted him because of lack of proof. However, he was relieved of his command. Nguyen Binh, who knew him, summoned him, and the latter became part of the former's general staff.

However, I did not lose contact with him, and one day TVH even asked me for a pistol and some ammunition, which I gave him in agreement with General Boyer de Latre. I saw him again in Saigon several times. Naturally I did not ask for any useful information on the military level, but for current information. Through him I knew that Nguyen Binh, the uncontested chief of the south, was not a communist and that he had serious difficulties with Ho Chi Minh and the men from the north. On a number of occasions Ho Chi Minh had asked him to come to the north. He had always refused.

At this time France had long since recognized the independence of Vietnam (the Baie d'Along agreement of 5 June 1948). After long negotiations at Hong Kong, where he had taken refuge, Bao Dai had agreed to return to Vietnam (April 1949) as the head of an independent state within the framework of the French Union. Therefore it was possible that Nguyen Binh, the chief of the rebellion in the south and a non communist, would agree some day to join Bao Dai. In this way the pacification of the entire south could have been realized rapidly under the protection of Bao Dai and against the communist regime.

One day, however, Nguyen Binh agreed to go to the north, thus giving in to the repeated requests, more and more threatening, of Ho Chi Minh and the men from the north. This was September 1951; he set out in the company of several loyal men. But the route to be traveled was long. He disappeared on the way and no one has heard from him since.

The disappearance of Nguyen Binh was a great loss for the south, and undoubtedly for free Vietnam.

After we had been there for a year, Lai Thieu had become a very attractive little town. We knew all of the inhabitants, and it could be said that a certain type of osmosis had been produced with the battalion. The return of the men to Lai Thieu,

after long and difficult operations in the Plaine des Jones (Plain of Reeds) or elsewhere, was really a time of joy and reunion for the men and the inhabitants.

I had been able to ask the inhabitants for they themselves to take over the surveillance and protection of the towns. The catholics had already created a militia under the orders of a very energetic young Vietnamese. But I wanted other inhabitants to take part in it. A new militia was in training, taking shape around five or six small staffs of the 301st, who had come over to our side.

Now it happened that some rapidly formed militias revolted and left in disagreement, taking away arms and equipment, after having assassinated the few Europeans who were their officers.

One day Mr. Tho informed me that the 301st battalion, which wanted to recover its honors, was about to send a dozen false turncoats into the militia being formed. After it had been created, they would kill the loyal men and carry off the weapons. Mr. Tho suggested to them that an important battalion staff with a good branch would have to join up before I would take the bait.

Indeed, very early one morning the aide of the battalion leader appeared in my office with a Mat automatic pistol. He announced that he was joining us and that other comrades would do the same in a short time, as soon as the occasion offered. I received him in a friendly way and, in view of his rank, invited him to our mess at noon after obviously touring the market in his company. In the following days three others of lesser importance arrived. Therefore I gave the command of the militia being trained to the aide of the 301st battalion chief, Le Loi. The militia trained slowly. I had asked for about 50 weapons, but I had only received about 20, old pop guns.

Le Loi did not appear satisfied with the weapons he received. I kept him waiting, telling him that I would do my best with the sector authorities. Moreover, this was the truth.

At the end of a month the armament of my militia had not improved, although seven members of the 301st had joined its ranks. Every day I took my habitual walk through the market or the town with Le Loi. The inhabitants were not ignorant of his real intentions. By the most diverse ways they came to warn me and ask me to get rid of this individual, whom they considered dangerous, as rapidly as possible. I continued to display my trust in him publicly, but the inhabitants were not reassured.

One day Mr. Tho, who intercepted their mail, sent me a letter intended for Le Loi and sent by his battalion chief.

"This matter is lasting too long," he had written. "The weapons which we will be able to recover are only poor weapons. We shall not send anyone else, and especially no weapons. Do the job as fast as possible, and be sure not to miss the battalion head."

I had received this message during the night. Early the next morning, after having given discreet orders to assure the protection of my office, I summoned Le Loi and his six companions, as I had already done a number of times. They did not display any anxiety.

After having greeted them as usual, I extended to Le Loi the letter which had been addressed to him. He read it slowly, without showing the least emotion. Then he handed it to me.

"Well," I said to him, "Is this true?"

"Yes," he answered me. "We have played a dangerous game and we have lost. What are you going to do?"

"You really had the basic mission of assassinating me, as well as some of my comrades?"

"Yes. You are very dangerous, not because the operations which you conduct did actually force us to evacuate the Quadrilateral, but because you have rallied the population to your side. We have practically no more contact with them. Yes, we would have killed you if we could have. That's war; you know as well as I that it is more important to kill a leader than a common soldier. The effect on morale is incontestable. Once you had disappeared, we would have been able to retake control of the people."

"What do you think I am going to do?"

"Have me shot, me and my comrades. We have lost, and that is the rule of the game."

"However, I regret it. I have spent a month with you. We could have been able to work together to pacify South Vietnam. I was beginning to consider you like a comrade."

"Me, too. But what do our lives count, yours as well as mine, in the combat in which we are engaged? You could have been killed long ago, and I as well; we have already killed your predecessor, Major Dupais. You may be soon. When one practices the profession which we are practicing, you and I, we have accepted the idea of dying long ago."

"I am going to give an account to General Boyer de Latre. The decision belongs to him, and therefore I am going to have you arrested. I shall separate you from your comrades."

The guards entered. I told them to take away the six Viet Minh soldiers who, understanding little or no French, had not been able to follow my conversation with Le Loi. However, they did not seem to harbor any illusion about the fate which awaited them.

Then, as I had often done on the preceding days, I left alone with Le Loi. An armored paratrooper followed us with his submachinegun, to render any attempt at flight deceptive. I took him to the 2nd Bureau of the battalion. I said to him, "Here is the battle order of the regiment and of your battalion. I know all of you, at least by your names; before you arrived I knew that you would come and what you were coming to do."

He was amazed to see how well I was informed on his unit, his leaders and their intentions.

"There are several errors in your table of organization," he said to me. "If you want, I can correct them."

"Do it," I said to him.

He did indeed change some names and added others.

"Now it is up to date; at least it shows the situation as it was when I left my battalion."

I sent Le Loi to Lieutenant Ballet, the head of the 2nd Bureau, who had attended the conversation, requesting him not to interrogate Le Loi, to see to his security, and particularly to treat him correctly. Then I left him with a hand shake.

The experiment I had been conducting for a month was finished. General Boyer de Lattre and my comrade Savani were aware of what was going on. The men were indicted before the Military Court of Saigon and condemned to death. I received the order to have them shot. I put the company of Captain Kaiser in charge of the execution.

I asked him to take them at five a.m. the next morning, to march with his company in the direction of the Quadrilateral and to go to a clearing which was well known to us. There the execution would take place in the prescribed form.

Then the corpses would be left on the ground. The Viet Minh battalion would be quickly alerted. They would come to take the bodies and to bury them in their fashion.

"All right," Kaiser said to me, "since it must be done, we shall do it."

But I felt a deep reluctance in him to have to perform such a mission. Like his men, seasoned soldiers now and accustomed to risks and deaths, he found it normal to kill an adversary on the field of battle when the risks were shared. But to shoot a disarmed and powerless man, and to feel his look before he died was a mission which they had never imagined and which, to a large degree, revolted them.

Very early one morning an Italian legionnaire, who had deserted a year before, appeared in my office. He appeared to be exhausted.

"Shoot me if you want to. I prefer to die rather than to continue to live with those people. I was able to escape tonight. I have been watched for a long time, but tonight I took my chances."

"What were you doing with the Viet Minh?"

"I was a cook at the regimental general staff and considered as the lowest of the boys. I'm fed up with it! Do what you want with me."

"So you were in a good position to know the people of Lai Thieu or of the surroundings who frequently went to the 301st?"

"Certainly, I especially know those who came to the Command Post. A year ago they were very numerous and included a lot of young girls. But now they are rare."

"Would you be able to recognize them?"

"Easily. I often had occasion to speak with them."

"Good; I am going to keep you hidden for two or three days. No one must know that you are here. The next market day I will make everyone march in front of you. You will point out all of those whom you recognize."

"Agreed, I'm willing to do it."

On the appointed day, at 9 a.m., I had all the outlets of the town closed and guarded. Then I installed the legionnaire on a small platform at the edge of the route above the market.

A company asked the inhabitants to assemble, to abandon their stands and to march in front of the legionnaire. There were several thousands of them. The march lasted until 3 p.m. The people pointed out by the legionnaire, about one hundred, were assembled and taken to the 2nd Bureau of Lieutenant Ballet. Among them were the owner of the cafe on the market place. He was one of my best intelligence agents; he frequently made contact with the 301st.

I saw him in the column, and wondered if the legionnaire would recognize him. He was recognized and taken to Lieutenant Ballet. I said a few words to him to keep up the game and not be burned.

Once the parade was over, most of the inhabitants went back to their jobs. The market functioned. One platoon had watched over it to see that nothing was stolen. Not a tangerine was missing from the stands. But once calm had been restored, the paratroopers rushed to the cafe and, in a few minutes, emptied it of its contents. For them the cafe owner was only a traitor who deserved at least this much punishment. I permitted this small looting to go on. Several days later I had him released and asked the 2nd Bureau in Saigon to indemnify him and to set him up some place else.

Among the people pointed out there were a score of young girls from Lai Thieu who were waiting in the school yard, worried about the fate which they were facing. I gave Lieutenant Ballet the order to put them into one of our trucks and take them to Saigon. I went to Saigon myself to see my comrade Savani, the head of the 2nd Bureau.